

United States Post Office and Courthouse Building (Old) HABS No. ME-120  
169 Middle Street  
Portland  
Cumberland County  
Maine

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PHOTOGRAPHS  
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
301 - 19th Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C.

## UNITED STATES POST OFFICE AND COURTHOUSE BUILDING (OLD)

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Location: 169 Middle Street (north side) between Exchange and Market Streets, Portland, Cumberland County, Maine.

Present Owner: Demolished.

Present Occupant: Veteran's Administration (1964).

Present Use: Federal offices (1964). Demolished (1965).

Statement of Significance: The Old Post Office and Courthouse was a distinguished example of the Renaissance Revival style. Careful workmanship and a lavish use of fine marble, generous scale, carefully calculated proportions, and a free-standing site contributed to its reputation as an architectural asset to the city of Portland.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: The following chronology is based on data supplied by Daniel R. Kuehn, Historian, National Park Service.

1849 City of Portland sold Merchants' Exchange and lot to United States for \$149,000, of which \$2,000 was allocated for repairs. Lot (16,615 sq. ft.) is bounded 196' on northeast by Market Street, 91'-8" on southeast by Middle Street, 166' on southwest by Exchange Street and 80' on northwest by Post Office Court and remains substantially as it was when purchased. Merchants' Exchange had been erected in 1835 at cost of \$100,000 including land and was considered most notable structure in Portland. It was built of "syenite" (granite) from Kennebunk Quarries and measured 136' on Exchange Street x 75' across Middle Street front, was three stories high crowned by dome 75' high above grade and 63' in diameter. Exchange was used after purchase as a Custom House, Post Office and United States Court House. (W. Woodford Clayton, History of Cumberland County, Maine, Everts and Peck, Philadelphia, 1886 and "Portland Custom House Dedicated 50 Years Ago," Portland Evening Express and Advertiser, March 31, 1922.)

- 1854 First post office building (Exchange) burned on January 8, 1854. Customs office was moved to Old Custom House.
- 1857 A new Post Office and Courthouse, Ammi B. Young (1800-1874), architect, was completed on site. (Eleven lithographed plates of Young's plans, elevations, sections, and structural and decorative details were published in A. H. Bowman, Plans of Public Buildings in Course of Construction under the Direction of the Secretary of the Treasury including the Specifications thereof, Washington, Treasury Department, 1855, Vol. II.)
- 1866 Second Post Office building was believed to be fire-proof but was so badly damaged in "Great Fire" of July 4, 1866, in which approximately 1,500 Portland buildings were destroyed, that it was declared unsafe by three government architects and builders and ordered torn down. ("To Come Down," Portland Daily News, July 18, 1866.) Act of Congress approved July 28, 1866, authorized new building on site. William Ralph Emerson inspected ruins on August 10.
- "Post Office, &c. - W. R. Emerson, Esq., U.S. Architect, was in the city yesterday examining the Post Office building and preparing his plans for the new building... We understand, from Mr. Emerson, that his plans will all be matured in a few weeks, for the new building, which will be an entirely different structure from the present one." (Portland Daily News, August 11, 1866.)
- 1867 By July 4, 1867, site was cleared and construction about to begin. ("Our New Post Office," Portland Daily Press, July 4, 1867.)
- 1868 Cornerstone was laid May 5, 1868, with Masonic ceremony. Silver plate deposited in cornerstone listed A. B. Mullett, Supervising Architect and B[artholomew] Oertly, Assistant Supervising Architect - did not mention Emerson. (Portland Daily News, May 6, 1868.)
- 1871 Post Office occupied building, still unfinished, on June 21, 1871. (Site Register, Office of Regional Counsel, General Services Administration, Boston, Mass., 02109.)

- 1873 Building was entirely finished. Total construction cost was \$401,302.50. A contemporary writer described structure as "... an elegant building of Vermont marble, occupying a square by itself. Its pure white walls are in strong contrast to the warmer-colored brick buildings about it, and it looks a little cold in its elegance and chasteness." (Edward H. Elwell, Portland and Vicinity, Loring, Short & Harmon and W. S. Jones, Portland, 1876, p. 77.)
- 1905 Courts moved from building. (Portland Directory, 1905.)
- 1934 Post Office abandoned building in June 1934.
- 1939 Building was reactivated by Navy Department in 1939. Since 1939 it housed various federal agencies and was occupied by an office of the Veteran's Administration in 1964.
- 1965 Building demolished for parking lot by General Services Administration.
2. Date of erection: 1867-1873, vide supra.
3. Architect: Alfred Bult Mullett (1834-90), Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department. Original plans are labelled "A. B. Mullett." Cornerstone deposit refutes attribution to William Ralph Emerson (1833-1918). Emerson (vide supra) does not appear on Register of employees of Treasury Department for 1867. Stone contractors were Galvan, Currie and Carew of Boston, who controlled North Middleburg (Vermont) Marble Company.
4. Original plans, construction, etc.: Forty-nine original designs by Mullett, plans, elevations, sections, and structural and decorative details are in National Archives, Washington, D.C. Floor plans and a few other drawings are initialled "H. K.," presumably H. Kreidler, a draftsman in the office of the Supervising Architect of the Treasury Department. (National Archives, Records of Public Buildings Service, Record Group 121)
5. Alterations and additions: Exterior remained unaltered. Interiors were rather radically altered and extensively subdivided for offices. Part of original main stairway survived. Passenger elevators were installed in 1911 and 1932 and a freight elevator in 1932.

6. Important old views: Large photograph of perspective rendering by Von Koerber dated February, 1868, is in Maine Historical Society, 485 Congress Street, Portland, Maine 04101. Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, 141 Cambridge Street, Boston, Mass. 02114, has excellent early stereograph.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

Building served as United States Post Office for sixty-three years. Ex-judge Charles W. Goddard was first Postmaster to occupy structure. Associate Supreme Court Justice Nathan Clifford had his chambers in Courthouse on second floor of building.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Primary and unpublished sources: Data compiled by Daniel R. Kuehn, Historian, National Park Service (1964). Interview and correspondence with John Pancoast, Director, Portland Museum of Art, 111 High Street, Portland, Maine 04101 and Glenn Skillin, Director, Maine Historical Society, 485 Congress Street, Portland, Maine 04101 (1967). Correspondence with Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., Box 692, Colby College, Waterville, Maine 04101 (1967). (Contents of cornerstone are in Maine Historical Society.)
2. Secondary and published sources: [A. B. Mullett] Annual Report[s] of the Supervising Architect to the Secretary of the Treasury for the Year[s] 1866 [1-1873] Washington Government Printing Office, 1866 [1-1873]. (Annual Report ... for 1868 includes small photograph of Von Koerber rendering.) Maine Writers' Project, Portland City Guide [Portland] Forest City Printing Company, 1940. A History of Public Buildings under the Control of the Treasury Department..., Washington, Government Printing Office, 1901. Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr.: "94-Year History of Old Post Office Reviewed" in Portland Maine Evening Express, January 20, 1966. For additional published sources, vide supra.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Building was white marble Renaissance Revival structure of monumental scale and unusually restrained design for its period. Facade was dignified by noteworthy Roman Corinthian tetrastyle portico above arcaded base.
2. Condition of fabric: Razed 1965.

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B. Description of Exterior:

1. Overall dimensions: 59'-5" x 128', height 61'-10" to top of balustrade; five-bay front, nine-bay sides, three stories. (Length, 128', includes portico.)
2. Foundations: Stone, walls 3'-6" and 4'-2" thick. Interior walls stone and brick, 2' thick. Portions of foundations of 1857 Post Office and Courthouse by Ammi B. Young were reused for this structure.
3. Wall Construction: Fine-grained and durable white marble from Middlebury, Vermont, backed by brick. Exterior walls were 3'-2" and 3'-10" thick at first floor, 2'-8" thick at second floor. First-floor bays were articulated by pier and arcade motif, upper two floors by unfluted Roman Corinthian pilasters on plinths. Pilasters were paired at corners on flanks of building but not on front and rear.
4. Framing: Bearing wall construction; principal interior walls brick, 12" thick. Open interior spaces supported on cast-iron columns spanned by iron I-beams carrying brick segmental arches bearing concrete infill to floor levels.
5. Porches: Pedimented Roman Corinthian tetrastyle portico with fluted columns, balustrades between plinths, was supported by open three-bay arcaded base, rose through upper two floors, and projected 11'-3" beyond front plane.
6. Chimneys: Two cast-iron stacks encasing chimney flues and ventilators, both approximately 4'-10" square with strongly projecting modillioned cornices, bestrode main roof ridge.
7. Openings:
  - a. Doorways and doors: Round-arched doorways 6' wide set within deep reveals were placed in three center bays of front, two end and middle bay of Exchange Street elevation, center bay of rear, and two end bays and bay second from front of Market Street side. End-bay doorways of two sides were surmounted by pediments. Doorways were closed by paired doors, each with two inset panels with carved moldings. Round-arched transoms above molded lintels had simple pattern of four lights.
  - b. Windows: First-floor windows were round-arched, set deeply between piers. Molding across faces of piers at springing line of arches rose to enframe extradoses headed by acanthus-carved keystones. Upper windows were rectangular and had simple molded architraves. Second-floor windows

measured 10'-5½" x 4', third-floor 7'-6" x 4'. French windows (casement doors) were planned for portico at second floor, but all sash was double-hung wooden, two-over-two-light.

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8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Hipped roof, 20° pitch, ridge parallel with sides of building, gabled roof over portico; slate covered, over iron framing.
- b. Cornice, eaves: Full marble entablature above pilaster zone was terminated by dentil course and modillioned cornice. Marble balustrade 3'-7" high on 1'-3" base was set approximately 2'-6" back of outer edge of cornice.

C. Description of Interior:

Note: Descriptions of interior refer to original plans. Interiors were subdivided and altered at undetermined dates.

1. Floor plans:

- a. Basement: Lighted by windows facing shallow areaways below grade, about two thirds of basement was open space with brick piers 3' square and 2'-6" square at intervals. Brick walls 2' thick enclosed engine room and men's wash room, both 18'-8" x 19'-1" located on either side at second and third bays from rear corners with wide center passage between them. Paired enclosed stairways rose in straight runs against rear wall. A ladies' room with private stairway, and a storage room were also in basement.
- b. First floor: Interior height was 15'-9". Vestibule 16'-0-½" wide spanned front and continued for three additional bays along Exchange Street side to form "dog-leg" 11'-2" wide. Inner vestibule wall had lock-boxes, etc., with glazing above, between Corinthian piers. Principal post office space, 41'-11" x 57'-5-½" with cast-iron columns at intervals, was open except for front corner occupied by enclosed stairway entered from Market Street and thinly partitioned cashier's office at rear toward Exchange Street side beyond narrower portion of vestibule. Private stairs descended from open floor area to ladies' room for employees. At end of vestibule, right-hand door led to cashier's office, left door to passage to postmaster's room beyond registered letter and cashier's windows. Postmaster's room and letter carriers' room (opposite on Market Street side) measured

19'-11" x 19'-2- $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Stairhall 14'-8" wide spanned rear of building and gave access to postmaster's room, letter carriers' room and central corridor between them.

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- c. Second floor: Original second-floor plan is missing, but plan of third tier of beams shows wall positions. Longitudinal section indicates height of 14'-6" to springing of segmental-arched brick vaulting carried on I-beams. Front was occupied by three judge's chambers (middle room one bay wide) separated by 7' wide corridor from courtroom 38' x 53'-1" spanning full interior width of building and rising through third floor 23'-4" plus coved ceiling 6'-2" above cornice of room. Arrangement beyond courtroom toward rear duplicated third-floor plan. 3-PORT 11-
- d. Third floor: Height of floor was 14' to springing of segmental-arched vaulting. Upper portion of large courtroom (at third through fifth side bays) barred access from front to rear. Front corner toward Market Street had room for judge of Admiralty Court. Second bay on Market Street lighted staircase. Admiralty courtroom 23'-4' $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 32'-10- $\frac{1}{2}$ " occupied corner toward Exchange Street. Beyond courtroom was central corridor 12'-8" wide leading from rear stairhall and flanked by four rooms, a jury and a grand jury room each 19'-11" x 19'-2- $\frac{1}{2}$ ", and a witness detention room and a commissioner's office, each 10'-1- $\frac{1}{2}$ " x 19'-2- $\frac{1}{2}$ ". Rear stairhall 14'-8" wide was flanked by smaller jury room and a record room, each 14'-8" x 11'.

2. Stairways: Principal staircase was at rear wall of building in hall 53'-1" x 14'-8". Two straight runs of nineteen risers rose to rectangular central landing from which six risers ascended (at right angle to lower flights) to second floor. Stairs to basement were enclosed under flights from first floor to landing. Main stairs from second to third floor began at either side of upper hall facing rear wall, each flight rising seven risers to side landings at rear wall, then ascending at right angles in two flights of nine risers each to central landing from which single flight of eight risers ran toward front of building to third floor level. Upper stairs had two open wells 7'-8" x 6'-7- $\frac{3}{4}$ ". Center stairs were 6'-5" wide, side flights 4'-0". Stairs were cast-iron, had ornamented iron newel posts, banisters, and stringers.

Subsidiary cast-iron staircase to judge's chambers was entered from door at second bay from front on Market Street side and was enclosed at first floor. Straight runs in opposite directions with winders at 90° turns led to second



floor. Straight runs in opposite directions (thirteen risers each) without winders rose to third floor.

3. Flooring: Basement, concrete and brick; first floor, marble and wood over concrete and brick; upper floors, wood over concrete.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster.
5. Doorways and doors: Most interior doorways were 4' wide, had four-paneled doors below three-light transoms, molded architraves. Main interior doors on central axis were 6' wide, had double doors.
6. Decorative features and trim: First floor had unfluted Roman Corinthian cast-iron columns and piers. Major ornament, aside from cast-iron main staircase, was concentrated in large courtroom, which had dado, arched door architraves with carved egg-and-dart outer moldings and acanthus keystones, carved door panel moldings, and paired fluted Roman Corinthian pilasters on paneled plinths. Pilasters supported full entablature with dentils and modillions, which was broken by groins above windows and central doors. Above entablature was coved ceiling with rectangular center and large ornamental circular ventilator. Circular clock over center door had meander and ovolo molding. Lunettes above upper windows (double height of room was not expressed by any variation in fenestration) had anthemion ornaments.
7. Notable hardware: Undetermined.
8. Lighting: Originally gas, later 65% incandescent, and 35% fluorescent electric fixtures throughout building.
9. Heating: Low pressure steam, two soft-coal-fired boilers installed 1932, retubed for oil-firing in 1955.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: Building occupied free-standing site on Middle Street between Exchange and Market Streets with 25' driveway at rear. Structure faced southeast.
2. Walks: Surrounded by public sidewalks.
3. Enclosures, outbuildings, landscaping: None.

Prepared by Denys Peter Myers  
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National Park Service  
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